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Romance Novels and Higher Education

[REBECCA REITEMEIER]

Anyone with any experience around bookish types will have long since picked up on a sense of elitism, especially in academia, when it comes to genre. There are countless biases in the world of literature, but one of the most pervasive prejudices is against popular romance fiction. Eric Selinger pointedly characterizes this particular hierarchy, stating that “disdain for popular romance fiction remains a way to demonstrate one’s intelligence, political bona fides, and demanding aesthetic sensibility.”¹ As the genre most widely associated with women, popular romance fiction has a long history of contempt, but in recent decades feminist authors and critics have contested the validity of the scorn that romance novels elicit. When considered in an academic setting, the controversy itself stands as a rich opportunity for exploration. More importantly, however, the capacity for the cultivation of empathy through an examination of the emotional lives of women makes the romance novel a valuable resource deserving of academic consideration. Dedicating thoughtful attention to stories that deal intimately with women and their experiences can enrich students’ ability to identify with female characters and by extension more empathetically understand and value the experiences of real women. Exploring historic and feminist critiques of romance novels and responses to those critiques from romance novel advocates can reveal where the bias against popular romance fiction comes from, and why, when considered carefully, romance novels have an important role to play in higher education.

The popular romance fictions discussed in this essay are romance novels which the Romance Writers of America define as a narrative in which the plot focuses on the main characters’ struggle to make their love story survive against obstacles and includes an “emotionally satisfying

¹ Eric Murphy Selinger, “Rereading the Romance,” *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 2 (2007), 308.

and optimistic ending.”² This type of romance includes a multitude of sub genres (erotic, historical, paranormal, LGBTQ+, inspirational, young adult, and many more), which altogether account for 34 percent of the United States fiction market.³ Because of the varied subgenres and breadth of authors and readers, it can be deceptively difficult to nail down similarities that unite all romance novels, but one thing that is consistent across the romance genre is the happy ending. As a descendent of the Greek comedy, romance ends with a wedding, or at least the promise of some kind of commitment between the heroine and her hero. This common denominator has been the target of criticism since feminist critique of the genre began, but Pamela Regis, author of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, argues that for romance readers, seeing the heroine overcome the barrier is the real draw of the stories, not the wedding at the end. She asserts that “the heroine of the romance novel...overcomes the barrier and is freed from all encumbrances to her union with the hero,” and “her choice to marry the hero is just one manifestation of her freedom.”⁴ Readers value the freedom of their heroine, not just a ring on her finger.

So where did the negative attitude toward these happy tales begin? For that we can blame the British government. The rise of the novel came in eighteenth century England as a result of several factors: an increase in literacy, thanks to the Puritans who valued and promoted the ability of a person to read their own bible; the ability to produce and distribute books as a result of the commercial prosperity which allowed the publishing industry to emerge; and a class of citizens that had, for the first time,⁵ spare time for leisure.⁶ In contrast to previous forms of fiction and printed storytelling, eighteenth-century novels “represented fictionalized reality, an image of everyday life of the ordinary people.”⁷ With simple language and familiar characters, settings, and topics, these novels appealed to an audience in a new way. Romance novels allowed for a closer emotional connection, especially through the novel “dealing with the inner life and the individual psychology, creating a bond of intimacy between a reader and a hero as well as the reader and the author, which enabled the process of

2 “About the Romance Genre,” MyRWA, Romance Writers of America: The Voice of Romance Writers. https://www.rwa.org/Online/Resources/About_Romance_Fiction/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx?hkey=dc7b967d-d1eb-4101-bb3f-a6cc936b5219.

3 Ibid.

4 Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 15.

5 The new capitalist economy in England made it possible for working citizens to acquire more wealth and the division of work and home (public and private) life created an environment conducive to private leisure.

6 Ana Vogrincic, “The Novel-Reading Panic in 18th-Century in England: An Outline of an Early Moral Media Panic,” *Medijska Istraživanja* 14, no. 2 (2008), 106.

7 Ibid., 107.

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identification.”⁸

At this time, eighteenth-century novels mostly took the shape of what would today be easily recognized as a popular romance; an affair between star-crossed lovers with seemingly inescapable obstacles who miraculously found a happy ending was a classic novel plot.⁹ This type of relationship and often class-based drama posed a threat, in the government’s eyes, to the wellbeing of the country’s citizens, particularly the women who made up most of the readership. This concern for women’s well-being led to the equivocation of libraries with brothels and a condemnation of the readers who chose to partake in them. Novel reading was associated with moral shortcomings: “Their regard for such low literature was seen to reflect their own bad taste and dubious personal traits: they were said to be fanciful and superficial, indolent and hasty, incapable of any serious study whatsoever.”¹⁰ One disgusted observer shared his distaste for the corruption of Britain’s ladies:

Women, of every age, of every condition, contract and retain a taste for novels [...T]he depravity is universal. My sight is every-where offended by these foolish, yet dangerous, books...I have seen a scullion-wench with a dishclout in one hand, and a novel in the other, sobbing o’er the sorrows of *Julia*, or a *Jemima*.¹¹

In order to combat the degeneration of the nation’s citizens, the British government employed bans on knowledge, limited access to light to retrain the public’s consumption of the books, and ultimately used shame campaigns to keep the people down.¹² The government’s theory behind these legislations was that if readers were too embarrassed to talk about the books in groups, they could hardly discuss their revolutionary themes and rise against the government. Maria Rodale, a modern champion of the romance novel, asserts that the aspects of romance novels that made them so threatening at the time were choice, adventure, great sex, and love of self. The topics empowered women readers (and all traditionally disempowered people) to think critically about their own lives and opportunities and to strive for better, which remain the same qualities of the genre that make it a positive one for women today.¹³

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 110.

11 *Sylph*, no. 5 (October 6, 1796), 36-37, quoted in *ibid.*, 103.

12 Maria Rodale, “How Romance Novels Empower Women,” *The Huffington Post*, December 7, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/maria-rodale/how-romance-novels-empowe_b_1315986.html.

13 Ibid.

As a huge part of the book market and a genre with a rich and titillating history, it is curious that an entire genre would be so frequently dismissed as a contender for academic consideration, but it is rare to find a formal course featuring such romances at an institution of higher education. Indeed, the eighteenth-century reputation of the romance novel as “low” literature persists, which may account for the absence of romance on college syllabi. Feminists have debated the worthiness of this status for decades, particularly romance’s status as either empowering or oppressive toward its women readers.

Feminist criticism of the romance genre as “an enslaver of women” started in the 1970s with Germaine Greer.¹⁴ Most feminist criticisms of the genre followed suit, with the overarching claim that the messages latent in romance novels reinforces passivity in women. Critics take issue with marriage as the ultimate goal of each and every heroine’s story because it reinforces patriarchal ideals and domestic stability as a woman’s reward for good behavior. Eric Selinger, a defender of romance novels, cites one of the central criticisms he receives as the belief that romance is merely a distraction from the injustices that women face in their lives, like a Band-Aid over a head wound.¹⁵ To this type of critic, romance is an opiate that keeps women from taking action: women readers get a quick fix of a fictional happy ending, which is just enough to keep them from taking real action to change their personal lives in a way that would make their lives more bearable. Janice Radway, a 1980s feminist critic, claims that “the romance continues to justify the social placement of women that has led to the very discontent that is the source of their desire to read romances.”¹⁶ Her claim suggests that romances glorify a stifled housewife lifestyle, and women readers subsequently become complicit (or at least complacent) in their own continued oppression without a set of instructions for how to get out of it.

In response to this vein of criticism, romance novel advocates have several approaches: defending the domestic sphere, defending the heroine, defending the audience and author, and defending the genre against poor critical academic technique. In defense of the domestic sphere, Christine Jarvis argues that “romantic fiction challenges the assumption that the public, male-associated sphere is inherently more worthy of reward and commitment than more private or personal achievements often associated with women.”¹⁷ This perspective values traditionally feminine traits/activities

14 Regis, 4.

15 Eric Murphy Selinger, “Rereading the Romance,” *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 2 (2007), 310.

16 Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 217, quoted in *ibid.*, 25.

17 Christine Jarvis, “Romancing the Curriculum: Empowerment through Popular

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and does not rely on downplaying or redefining the domestic betrothal ending as central to the story. Yes, the heroine gets a husband at the end, and no, that doesn't make her a disempowered woman. "Domesticity is not the necessary equivalent of oppression, either externalized or internal, and to dismiss it as such is to undermine a valid aspiration or life choice for women."¹⁸ Just because the heroine is married and happy about it doesn't mean that she is brainwashed or stifled. It means that she values that form of relationship, which is a form and ritual celebration that has been valued for centuries. If a marriage at the end reinforces the value of a domestic choice for readers, then that is not inherently reinforcing patriarchal control over those same readers. Rather, it is mirroring their own priorities and love back to them in a representational and empathetic way.

To defend the heroine, author Jennifer Crusie cites the romance heroine's self-determined value apart from the hero entirely. She states that her heroine "doesn't have to earn her hero's love; she gets it as a freebie, unconditionally, because she's intrinsically worthy of being loved, and her worth is demonstrated to the reader by the way she conducts her quest."¹⁹ This worthwhile heroine is capable of overcoming the obstacles that are put in front of her, and when she does overcome them she gets the rewards of personal growth with a bonus of a loving man at her side to cheer her on. This loved and loving heroine is a representation of victory over challenges, which is also looked down upon as being idealistic and blind to the harsh realities of women's lived experiences. Crusie argues, however, that a happy ending is not naive:

Romance fiction places women at the center of the story by refusing to pay lip service to the post-modernist view that life is hopeless and we're all victims. Instead, romance fiction almost universally reinforces the healthy human perception that the world is not a vicious tragic place, especially for women. This has often been cited as evidence that romance fiction does indeed dwell in fantasy land, but showing women's victories is not unrealistic, nor is tragedy inherently superior or more realistic than comedy.²⁰

Romance heroines reflect the reader's world back to them through complex,

Culture," *Convergence* 28, no. 3 (1995), 71-77.

18 Janet, "Romance Is Not a Feminist Genre – And That's Okay." *Dear Author*, January 6, 2015, dearauthor.com/features/letters-of-opinion/romance-is-not-a-feminist-genre-and-thats-okay/.

19 Jenny Crusie Smith, "This Is Not Your Mother's Cinderella: The Romance Novel as Feminist Fairy Tale," in *Romantic Conventions*, ed. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 55.

20 "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real," *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, no. 1-2 (1997): 91-92.

valuable characters who apply their skills and are rewarded, which is hardly overstepping reality. These heroines are not all wish-fulfillment—they simply deal in the reality of optimism. Romance authors “are not constructing fantasies, they are reinforcing what women already know: when things get bad, women are often the ones who have the strength to endure and prevail.”²¹ The novels do not deny that women can face terrible hardships, but persevering fictional heroines represent very real women who withstand and conquer those hardships.

In defense of romance authors and their audiences, Crusie puts her belief succinctly: “Women are not stupid nor are they out of touch with reality.”²² As an author, Crusie trusts her readers to be discerning human beings who can tell the difference between reality and fiction while maintaining the ability to enjoy a story’s imaginative gap and apply relevant themes to their own lives, just like the audience of any other genre. She is not alone in this belief. The women who read her books are not homogeneous or stupid audience, and neither are Crusie’s fellow authors, who are women of color, lawyers, physicians, and professors.²³ The women writing for women at the top of this genre do not underestimate their audiences or sanitize their experiences. As Crusie articulates, “far from ducking reality, romance novels have dealt with date rape, widowhood, loss of children, alcoholism, AIDS, birth defects, imprisonment, child abuse, breast cancer, racism, and every other major problem women face today.”²⁴ Romances all have happy endings, but they do not all have happy circumstances, and they often explore gritty and intense emotional themes, all of which have been historically taboo. Romance novels have been a reliable outlet for the socially unacknowledged sexual lives and emotional turmoil of women, something no other genre would touch.

Against poor critical academic technique, romance defenders’ main grievance is that romance is treated as a homogeneous group and receives criticism for things that other genres that are considered with more nuance do not receive. Many critics try to characterize the whole genre based on “a few texts that a critic mistakes as representative.”²⁵ Because romance is such an expansive genre, using selections from one subgenre as a case study for the genre as a whole is inaccurate. Likewise, picking one book from each subgenre would be similarly one-sided due to variation within subgenres. Sweeping generalizations about romance novels based

21 Ibid, 85.

22 Ibid, 92.

23 Emma Pearse, “Why Can’t Romance Novels Get Any Love?” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, March 12, 2015, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-cant-romance-novels-get-any-love-180954548/.

24 Crusie, “Romancing,” 85.

25 Pamela Regis, preface to *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), xii.

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on a half dozen gothic romances do not create a complete picture. Another area where romance novels are criticized for not performing beyond the expectations of other genres is in educating women about their individual liberation. A common critique is that romance novels don't give women readers instructions or a "comprehensive program" for reinventing their lives in a more empowered, radical way. Regis responds to this criticism by asking: which novels do?²⁶ Why should romance novels be held to a standard of social revolution for which no other genre is held responsible?

Another defense for romance novels stems from the criticism that the heroine's marriage at the end stifles her character because she loses her individuality, so that "in this view, the ending in effect cancels out the narrative that has gone before."²⁷ Because other aspects of the heroine's life are not deeply explored beyond the scope of her romantic relationship, she must be one-dimensional and stifled. Regis's defense against this sort of claim is that romance is being critiqued for things that other genres are equally guilty of but are not criticized for: namely, ending the narrative, which all books must do; and providing a limited exploration of the skills and life of the protagonist. Regis compares this to Moby Dick—the book does not flesh out Captain Ahab's life on land, but that is not a weakness of the story, it is a result of the story's focus, which is necessary especially in genre fiction.²⁸

The reception of romance in academia has reflected many of the doubts about romance and few of its defenses. Romance, as "the most female of popular genres" is written predominantly by women, for women, and about women.²⁹ It is (unfortunately) no wonder, then, that it would become the object of scrutiny. "Sociologists have long recognized a phenomenon called 'feminization'...which means that anything that becomes associated solely with women falls in general esteem."³⁰ Simply being associated with women is a threat to the legitimacy of any object, and this sexist pattern applies directly to the reception of romance novels. Marketing has also been of no help to romance's public reputation, particularly the marketing of Harlequin romances, which have capitalized heavily on the notion that sex sells, to the detriment of the perceived integrity of the genre: "All those red garters and hint o'dick covers may help boost individual print runs, but at what price?"³¹ Unfortunately, because women's sexuality in many ways

26 Regis, *Natural*, 13.

27 Ibid., 10.

28 Ibid., 12.

29 Regis, preface, xii.

30 Jenny Crusie, "Defeating the Critics: What We Can Do About the Anti-Romance Bias," *Romance Writers Report* 18, no. 6 (1998).

31 Candace Proctor, "The Romance Genre Blues, or Why We Don't Get No Respect," in *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, ed. Sally Goade (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 19, quoted in Selinger, 309.

is still taboo, openly acknowledging the sexual themes of some books seems to overshadow the rest of the value of the genre.

Despite these surface-level misunderstandings, and partially because they challenge a student to work past misrepresentation, romance novels should be brought into higher education literature curriculums because they would further a primary goal of liberal arts education: empathy. Empathy, or “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another,” allows people to connect with one another despite differences in their lived experiences or beliefs, and this ability to imagine others complexly is a foundational skill toward interpersonal collaboration and respect.³² Women are taught to identify (or empathize) with men because, as Jane Tompkins points out, “stories about men...function as stories about all people,” so “women learn at an early age to identify with male heroes.”³³ The same kind of practice in empathy is rarely required or even encouraged in men toward female characters, and this imbalance contributes to the perception that men are standard and women are peripheral. Given that women are not, in fact, side characters in the human story and the continuation of the human world, literature which explores some of their experiences could provide opportunities for all students to see female characters placed front and center and spend time unpacking their stories, encouraging identification with and appreciation for women’s experiences. A critical academic consideration of romance novels would help the situation by encouraging a female-centric identification outside of the self in the classroom from a women-written, women-centric area of literature. Surely an area of literature that focuses on the empowerment of the emotional lives of women could generate valuable discussion to an educational setting, especially where curricula still focus predominantly on work by and about dead men. While lack of diversity in the canon has slowly been addressed with gradual adoption of texts written by women and people of color, the addition of romance, which has a largely ignored literary history, would help diversify the canon in a meaningful way.

According to a 2017 survey by the Romance Writers of America, the average readership of romance novels are 82 percent female, 35-39 years old, 73 percent white, and 86 percent heterosexual.³⁴ The statistics immediately raise the question: can a genre with such a homogenous audience really be empowering or move beyond white feminist concerns and priorities that ignore the needs and perspectives of women of color or LGBTQ+ women? Some scholars think yes. There are romances written

³² Dictionary.com, s.v., “Empathy,” accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/empathy>.

³³ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17, quoted in Regis, preface, xii.

³⁴ “About.”

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by people of color with characters of color, and LGBTQ+ romance has been one of the most steadily growing subgenres since the 1970s.³⁵ Going beyond the American classroom, Jayashree Kamble argues that romances can be used for bolstering equality in other countries like India. Kamble writes: “When viewed through the lens of a culture that has never experience a feminist movement...romance clearly displays the potential to provide women in other cultures with tactics to recognize and contest patriarchy as it exists in their own contexts.”³⁶ According to Selinger, Juliet Flesch also argues this point, saying that “romance authors in Australia have used the genre for a variety of explicitly nationalist ends... and to weigh in on local issues or race.”³⁷ In addition, Selinger cites Guy Mark Foster, a black author, who says that “‘no other literary form has thus far attempted to take up the vexed question of interracial sex as it related to black women’ with ‘the commitment and purpose’ of popular romance.”³⁸ Romance novels can be an instructional tools that serve as model narratives of female characters with agency and the opportunity to navigate complicated relational or cultural circumstances. According to these scholars’ testimonies, it does seem that romance fiction has the potential to uplift marginalized groups and has begun doing so, further elevating romance’s status as an inclusive and empowering genre.

Empathy is a key tenet of what a liberal arts education is supposed to create and is an essential component of peaceful continued existence on earth in terms of individual relationships and, more significantly, in terms of a global outlook on sustainability and collaboration on a planet with finite resources.³⁹ The ability to continually learn and apply cross-disciplinary knowledge as the focus of liberal arts education directly serves that necessary cause. “By prioritizing the nurturing of empathy through a liberal education, we can do much to effect positive change. We can help our students understand their connections to other humans, animals, and

35 Christine Grimaldi, “Can LGBTQ Romance Give Happily-Ever-After to Identities Beyond Gay and Lesbian?” Slate, October 8, 2015, www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/10/08/lgbtq_romance_how_the_genre_is_expanding_happily_ever_after_to_all_queer.html.

36 Jayashree Kamble, “Female Enfranchisement and the Popular Romance: Employing an Indian Perspective,” in *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, ed. Sally Goade (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 162, quoted in Selinger, 317-318.

37 Selinger, 318.

38 Guy Mark Foster, “How Dare a Black Woman Make Love to a White Man! Black Women Romance Novelists and the Taboo of Interracial Desire,” in *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, ed. Sally Goade (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 133, quoted in Selinger, 317.

39 Nadine Dolby, “The Decline of Empathy and the Future of Liberal Education,” *Association of American Colleges & Universities*, December 18, 2014, www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/decline-empathy-and-future-liberal-education.

the planet—and perhaps, eventually, find their way back to themselves.”⁴⁰ The cornerstone of the path to meaningful interactions with each other and back to oneself could be romance novels, which have been a foundational tool for exploring emotions and interpersonal relationships in literature since it spooked the British government in the eighteenth century. “A liberal education...educates the whole person,” and what better way to round out that whole than by examining the unique and historically suppressed feminine perspective through romance and the exploration of the emotional lives of women, who have traditionally been the locus of empathy?⁴¹

There are already scholars championing this idea in the academic world. Frantz Lyons and Eric Selinger created the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, and thanks to their efforts, the association has “injected the genre with legitimacy in the eyes of academic institutions and romance fiction is now being debated and dissected in classrooms from George Mason University to the illustrious classrooms of Princeton.”⁴² The association’s journal, the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, has facilitated scholarly consideration of not just what an uninitiated viewer might expect of mainstream romance, but diverse romance-based topics, like “Sapphic Romance in Mexican Golden Age Filmmaking” and “disability and romance.”⁴³

Romance also allows students to be introspective. In classrooms where students have already studied romances, the study of the structure of the novels encouraged self-reflection, and “made some students painfully aware that what had appeared to be individual, distinct, personal events, were in fact social and cultural too.”⁴⁴ First, they discovered the repetitive plot, relationships, and assumptions in romance novels, and then came to recognize the same structures and expectations in their own lives and were forced to reckon with the importance and responsibility of the context in which one chooses (consciously or not) to view one’s life.⁴⁵

Romance could be a vehicle to bring discussion of the deep emotional lives of a wide variety of women and their freedom into the classroom and may prompt more personal, emotional discussion and connection rather than objective/analytical dissection of the structure or form (although that is certainly also a valuable part of the academic analysis of the genre). Education through romance could also encourage deeper understanding of one’s own emotions, life patterns, and expectations toward the goal of recognizing systematic influences and taking responsibility for addressing

40 Ibid.

41 Jill Tiefenthaler, “The Value of a Liberal-Arts Education,” *The Hechinger Report*, April 10, 2013, hechingerreport.org/the-value-of-a-liberal-arts-education/.

42 Pearse.

43 Ibid.

44 Jarvis.

45 Ibid.

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those influences. The inner lives of women deserve to be explored and valued in academia. While romance novels are certainly not the only vehicle for that exploration, they do offer a varied and intimate look at women writers' and readers' interests and passions, and a prolific genre with such a rich history and healthy modern debate should be included in an education that values literature and the multidimensionality of human experience.